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ABSTRACT

The Welsh verbal noun, a form spanning two grammatical categories much as the English "-ing" form does, is examined from the points of view of its dual role in Welsh grammar; its occurrence in the history of the Celtic language family; periphrastic tense constructions with "bod" ("be"), "gwneud" ("do"), and "darfod" ("happen"); periphrastic imperatives and passives; and its discourse function. It is concluded that the verbal noun is characteristically Celtic, and that its continued nominal uses and extensive participation in many parts of the Welsh verbal system enhance the stylistic possibilities of the language and provide points of comparison and contrast with other language families such as Germanic and Romance languages. (MSE)

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The Verbal Noun in Welsh

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0. Introduction

Non-finite verbal forms in the Celtic languages exhibit significant syntactic differences from those of the other two main Indo European language families of Western Europe, Germanic and Romance. This paper investigates the Celtic verbal noun both in its function as a noun and, particularly, in its verbal role in Welsh.

1. The dual nature of the verbal noun

The verbal noun is, as its name suggests, a form which spans two grammatical categories much as does an English _-ing_ form:

(1) Singing is fun.

(2) She has been singing all day.

In these examples, the _-ing_ form in (1) is the subject of the sentence. It would be termed a gerund[1] in traditional grammatical analysis; the formally identical 'singing' in (2) would be considered a present participle which belongs to the verbal system of English as an obligatory component of the present perfect progressive construction.

The nominal character of the verbal noun is apparent at all historical stages of the Celtic language family. Celtic has no true infinitive, no non-finite verbal form which can take a direct object.[2] The object of a verbal noun is in the genitive case. This rule holds in Irish to this day; Henry (1960: 29) describes the Irish verbal noun as 'syntactically a substantive'. Studies of the earliest stages of Celtic (Meid 1968, 1972) indicate that genitive case, and indeed a suffixal case system, characterized

not only the Goidelic (Irish) branch of Celtic but also the Brythonic (Welsh) branch, where the scanty Gaulish or Continental Celtic data indicate case morphology. Case marking on nouns is not attested at any historical stage of Welsh and it is thus not possible to state whether the object of a verbal noun is in the genitive or, as one would expect for a true direct object, the accusative:

(3) Rydych chi yn darllen y llyfr.

ptc-are you Asp read the book

'You are reading the book.'

In the above example and throughout this paper, the abbreviations "ptc" for "particle" and "Asp" for "aspectual particle" are used in glossing Welsh. In the following example, the nominal nature of the verbal noun becomes apparent through the pronominal object:

(4) Rydych chi yn ei ddarllen.[3]

ptc-are you Asp its (masc.) read

'You are reading it.'

The only possible form for the pronominal object of a verbal noun is the possessive; cf. ei fab 'his son', ei lyfr 'his book'[3], etc. The pronominal object of a finite verb is not possessive:

(5) Darllenais i e.

read (past) I it (masc.)

'I read it.'

Evans' 1964 Grammar of Middle Welsh, the standard reference work for the medieval language, notes the possessive object as in (4) above as well as the noun-like combination of a definite article

and a verbal noun, e.g., hela 'hunt(ing)', yr hela 'the hunt'. Although he acknowledges the verbal traits of the verbal noun, Evans (1964: 159) states that 'fundamentally its constructions are those of the noun'.

2. The verbal character of the Welsh verbal noun: bod periphrases

Welsh is an analytic language rather than a synthetic one. This is well illustrated by its tense system: a 1976 Contemporary Welsh Grammar for use in Welsh secondary schools lists as the canonical verbal system three synthetic tenses, the preterite, the future and the conditional, and twelve analytic tenses. The latter are periphrases composed of a form of the 'primary tense auxiliary' (Thomas 1967) bod 'be', an aspectual particle and a verbal noun, e.g.:

(6) Mae[4] e'n canu

is he-Asp sing

'He sings./He is singing.'

This example is in the present tense; note elision between e 'he' and yn, the imperfective aspectual particle.

(7) Mae e wedi canu

is he Asp sing

'He has sung.'

The tense of (7) is the perfect. These examples illustrate two of the most frequent periphrastic tense constructions with bod 'be'. The imperfective aspectual particle yn and the perfective aspectual particle wedi, which is also a lexical item meaning 'after', may co-occur, in which case the tense is the perfect continuous:

(8) Mae e wedi bod yn canu

is he Asp be Asp sing

'He has been singing.'

Periphrases with bod 'be' are now more productive than in Middle Welsh, and the position of the verbal noun in the verb paradigms of the modern language is assured.

3. Periphrases with gwneud and darfod

Forms of two verbs used as auxiliaries, gwneud 'do' (<Middle Welsh gwneuthur) and darfod 'happen' also collocate with the verbal noun; Thomas (1967) considers these the 'secondary tense auxiliaries' of Welsh. Wagner (1959) notes, in Modern North Walian, a punctual future expressed by a gwneud periphrasis:

(9) gwna i gario

will-do I carry

'I will carry.'

Wagner compares this modern usage to Middle Welsh written prose, where such phrases as

(10) dyuot a oruc

come ptc did

'[he] came'

occurred frequently in narrative; oruc 'did' is a suppletive preterite form of gwneuthur 'do'. Middle Welsh gwneuthur periphrases always front the verbal noun; this order is still possible in Modern Welsh, although it is marked. It was a marked stylistic device in Middle Welsh literary language as well; a close analysis (Raney 1984: 198-199) of a 450-line passage from the medieval Pwyll text has shown that gwneuthur periphrases are virtually excluded when characters are speaking.

Periphrases with a lexical item meaning 'do' are frequent in Germanic languages. In English they are used to form negatives, interrogatives, elliptical answers and emphatic statements:

(11) I do not smoke.

(12) Do you smoke? Yes, I do.

(13) I do smoke!

Scandinavian languages, e.g., Danish, exploit an "elliptical answer" construction similar to that in the English example (12):

(14) Snakker du dansk? Ja, det gør jeg.
speak you Danish yes that do I
'Do you speak Danish? Yes, I do.'

Colloquial German uses a 'do' periphrasis frequently, although not exclusively, with action verbs:

(15) Tust du rauchen?
do you smoke
'Do you smoke?'

More standard, although entirely acceptable in colloquial speech as well, is the simple verb-subject question Rauchst du? 'Do you smoke?'. The Romance languages also use verbs meaning 'do' in periphrases, e.g., the causative construction with faire in French.

Periphrases with verbs meaning 'happen' are far less common in European languages; one may say in English 'I happened to see my teacher yesterday', but this collocation of two verbs does not involve combination of an auxiliary with a semantically weightier non-finite form. In Welsh, however, darfod 'happen' has become an auxiliary in some dialects. The periphrasis is not new; Middle Welsh had it with daruot 'happen', although it was uncommon.

In Modern North Walian, however, the periphrasis has become productive in the form 'happen subject verbal noun':

(16) Ddaru o fynd
happened he go
'He went.'

The verbal noun darfod 'happen' has become a defective auxiliary in North Walian; it only occurs in its preterite form ddaru 'happened'. South Walian does not use the construction exemplified in (15) but rather the synthetic preterite of the lexical verb:

(17) Fe aeth e
ptc went he
'He went.'

and thus we recognize a syntactic isogloss between North Walian with the ddaru periphrasis, and South Walian, which retains the synthetic preterite.

4. Periphrastic imperatives and passives

The imperative and passive are two more parts of the verbal system of Welsh which exploit the verbal noun. The Welsh imperative, like that of English but unlike those of Romance or other Germanic languages, is periphrastic only in the negative:

(18) Don't worry.

(19) Peidiwch â phoeni
cease with worry
(formal)
'Don't worry'

(20) Paid â gwneud hwn
cease with do this
(familiar)
'Don't do this'

Phoeni 'worry' and gwneud 'do' are verbal nouns. The positive imperative requires a single conjugated verb, e.g.:

(21) Edrychwch ar hwn
look at this
'Look at this.'

The Welsh periphrastic passive makes much use of the verbal noun. Its history and semantics are of some interest to comparatists. Like the neighboring Romance language family, Celtic has in its history a synthetic passive in -r; cf. Latin amatur '[he] is loved', Welsh canir '[it] is sung'. The synthetic Latin passive has completely given way to an analytic passive system in Romance, e.g., French il est aimé 'he is loved'. In Welsh, the -r passives are literary rather than conversational, but remain within the competence of modern native speakers, particularly in formulaic or fixed expressions, e.g.:

(22) sancteiddier dy enw
may-be-sanctified your name
'hallowed be Thy name' (Lord's Prayer)

(23) Argraffwyd gan...
was-published by
'Published by...'

The phrase in (23) is found in the first few pages of books published in Welsh. The -wyd form is the only member of the Welsh synthetic passive system without -r orthography or vocalism.

The unmarked passive in Modern Welsh combines cael 'get', used as an auxiliary, with a verbal noun. The optional agent phrase is introduced by gan 'by' (cf. (23) above) and the verbal noun has

a possessive pronominal object (cf. (4) above):

(24) Fe ges i fy magu gan fy rhieni
ptc got I my breed, by my parents
raise
'I was raised by my parents.'

Syntactically, this Welsh passive is quite unlike the English translation given. The Celtic languages have no infinitive; they also have no participle which enters into the verbal system.[6] The verbal noun, which is neither active nor passive itself, collocates with cael 'get'. 'Get' passives are also found in Germanic languages:

(25) I got promoted at work.

(26) Everything got all messed up. (colloquial)

(27) German:
Er hat das geschenkt bekommen
he has that 'gifted' gotten
'He was given that as a gift.'

However, these English and German passives are marked forms, not productive options with virtually all verbs capable of passivization as is the Welsh cael periphrases.

5. The discourse function of the Welsh verbal noun

The verbal noun is central to a non-finite main clause type[7] found in both medieval and modern Welsh literature as well as in actual modern speech. It is a rule of thumb of Welsh-English translation that the "tense" of the verbal noun is understood to be that of the most closely preceding conjugated verb in the discourse:

(28) Yr oedd yn ddiwrnod poeth yn niwedd Mehefin,
ptc was ptc day hot in end June

a Jane a Geini'n croesi... (Kate Roberts, Traed mewn cyffion.)
and Jane and Geini- cross
Asp

'It was a hot day in June, and Jane and Geini were crossing...'

The imperfective aspectual particle yn elides with the word preceding it as in (6) above. The verbal noun croesi 'cross' is the only verb in its clause, but the past tense oedd 'was' has set the scene in the past and one thus translates croesi as 'were crossing'; the translation reflects the plural subject of the non-finite clause. The verbal noun seems so natural in this independent role that it is used even in the absence of preceding discourse. The novel from which example (28) is taken begins with the descriptive passage in (29):

(29) Sŵn pryfed, sŵn eithin yn clecian, sŵn gwres, a llais
sound insects sound gorse Asp crackle sound heat and voice

y pregethwr yn sïo ymlaen yn felfedaidd.
the preacher Asp hum ahead ptc velvety

'The sound of insects, the sound of gorse [was] crackling,
the sound of heat and the preacher's voice [was] humming
on like velvet.'

We cannot invoke the aforementioned rule of thumb to "find" the tense of the verbal nouns clecian 'crackle' and sïo 'hum', since no discourse precedes. Idiomatic English translation would most likely introduce finite verbs into this description; for their

tense, one would either have to assume it to be the narrative past, or consult the following discourse for past tenses. The contribution of the Welsh construction with the verbal noun used independently to discourse grammar may well be that one must consider not only anaphoric but also discourse-cataphoric material--indeed, close, sentence-by-sentence analysis must be combined with analysis of the entire text as an entity.

6. Conclusion

The verbal noun is characteristically Celtic. Its continued nominal uses and extensive participation in many parts of the Welsh verbal system enhance the stylistic possibilities of the language and provide points of comparison and contrast to other language families such as those of Western Europe discussed in this paper.

Notes

[1]The definition of "gerund" in Webster's Unabridged Dictionary indeed states that the English gerund is a "verbal noun".

[2]Strachan (1909: 77) refers to the verbal noun as an infinitive, although he qualifies his statement with a disclaimer that the Welsh infinitive is "merely a verbal noun".

[3]The difference between darllen in (3) and lenited ddarllen in (4) is due to a lexical contact mutation triggered by the word ei 'his, its'. This also accounts for the difference between y llyfr 'the book' in (3) and ei lyfr 'his book'.

[4]Bod itself is the only Welsh verb which does not allow a periphrasis: *Mae e'n bod is not a possible present tense of bod.
is he-Asp be

[5]The citation form, poeni, may also be heard in (19). The initial ph [f] results from the aspirate lexical contact mutation occasioned by the preposition â 'with'. This mutation affects only voiceless stops and is dying out of the language.

[6]A Welsh form in -edig, e.g., in caredig 'beloved', is related to the verbal noun caru 'love', but is used adjectivally only.

[7]Strachan (1909: 124) has called this the "historical infinitive". French also has an infinitif historique or infinitif de narration, which according to Grévisse (1969: 689) is generally preceded by et de and always refers to the past.

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